

GAO: Feds Still Lack Coordinated Plan to Protect Disaster Responders

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), Christopher Shays (R-CT), Vito Fossella (R-NY), and Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) released a new report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) revealing that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) lacks a coordinated, department-wide plan to protect the health and safety of Americans who respond to public health disasters. In its report, the GAO identified five key lessons from the federal response to the 9/11 attacks that should help guide future disaster response efforts. A summary of the GAO's five lessons can be found below.

Maloney, Nadler, and Fossella authored and Shays co-sponsored the 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, which would provide health care to the thousands of Americans who were sickened or injured by the toxic aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

"If the federal government had a coordinated plan on 9/11 to protect disaster responders thousands of people wouldn't be sick today," said Rep. Maloney. "With seventh anniversary of the attacks fast approaching, it's totally unacceptable that we don't have plans to take care of ailing 9/11 responders and to protect the health of responders to future disasters."

"The response to September 11th-related health concerns has lacked coordination and a sense of urgency, and I believe federal, state and local health systems have to more accurately diagnose and treat these illnesses," said Rep. Shays. "Much work needs to be done to ensure those affected receive the care they deserve, and I hope the administration will fulfill its commitment to those exposed to the toxins from September 11, 2001, and in the resulting cleanup."

Rep. Fossella said, "These recommendations provide a guide for the federal government to follow in the future to protect the health and well-being of first responders. But these recommendations also highlight the lack of adequate services that are available right now for sick and injured 9/11 responders. While it is important for the government to use the lessons of 9/11 to be better prepared to manage potential health issues of responders in the future, federal officials must stop delaying efforts to help the unsung heroes of 9/11."

"Yet again, the Bush Administration has failed to learn from its mistakes," said Rep. Nadler. "In the aftermath of 9/11, it became clear that the government lacked a comprehensive public health plan to protect the brave responders who came to the World Trade Center to help. This lapse in leadership led to thousands of people from all over the nation becoming sick. Not only has the White House failed to fully provide for their needs, its ongoing failure to develop plans for future disaster response efforts is outrageous and extremely dangerous."

Responding

to a request from Reps. Maloney, Shays, and Fossella, the GAO identified the following five lessons from the experience of current World Trade Center health programs that could help in the event of a future disaster:

- 1) Registering all responders during a response to a disaster could improve implementation of screening and monitoring services;
- 2) Designing and implementing screening and monitoring programs that foster the ability to conduct epidemiologic research could improve the understanding of health effects experienced by responders and help determine the need for ongoing monitoring;
- 3) Providing timely mental health screening and monitoring that is integrated with physical health screening and monitoring could improve the ability to accurately diagnose physical and mental health conditions and prevent more serious mental health conditions from developing;
- 4) Including a treatment referral process in screening and monitoring programs could improve the ability of responders to gain access to needed treatment; and
- 5) Making comparable services available to all responders, regardless of their employer or geographic location, could ensure that more equitable access to services for responders and help ensure that data collected about responders's health is consistent and comprehensive.